



Robin McKelle Blends An Old Soul With A New Sound

Artist Interview by: Donna Kimura
JazzReview.com

July 2008 - Vocalist Robin McKelle, who made a splash with her debut CD, is poised to create even bigger waves this year with the release of her much-anticipated sophomore release, *Modern Antique*.

The CD, which comes out in the United States in August, had an early release in France, where it debuted at no less than No. 1 and continues to ride high on the jazz charts with a cool sound that offers a nod to the 1940s while avoiding being sentimental.

The singer recently spoke with JazzReview about her latest album, her popularity in Europe, and what's coming up next for her.

JazzReview.com: Congratulations on your second CD. How would you describe it?

Robin McKelle: *Modern Antique* is definitely a follow-up to my first CD, which was a big band album of music of the '40s and more in the standard traditional jazz style. With *Modern Antique*, I stay with that a little and also explore the blues side of what I like. It's a mix of standards that are very well known and some that may not be as well known, but are my personal favorites like "Save Your Love For Me" and "I Want To Be Loved."

JazzReview.com: Did you approach *Modern Antique* differently than you did your debut album?

Robin McKelle: I did. For the second album, I had a lot more say in what was happening. I was really involved with it from the beginning. I was the co-producer. For me, I was much more involved from all the arrangements and definitely the song selection. It was a big responsibility to be producing alongside Willie [Murillo] this time. I really loved it.

JazzReview.com: You've been quoted as saying "I have an old soul." What do you mean?

Robin McKelle: Particularly to music, I feel connected lyrically to what is happening in standards. That's why the music is considered timeless. For me, I think there are many songs that still have a lot validity for what period we are in today, whether it is romantic or whatever. I guess I'm a hopeless romantic. People have told me, "You have a young spirit, old soul."

JazzReview.com: You have such a feel for the music of the '40s. Where does that come from?

Robin McKelle: I don't know where it actually comes from. I didn't necessarily grow up listening to a lot of jazz music. I grew up listening to a lot of pop music like a normal kid. I was drawn to jazz through playing piano and being part of the jazz ensemble at my school. I was drawn to the

melodies and to the rhythms. I think I have a natural feel rhythmically with what is happening, but I don't know where it came from. I had a love for it and listened when I got older, and took it in.

JazzReview.com: What kind of pop music did you listen to?

Robin McKelle: My goodness, the typical. Whitney Houston. Michael Jackson. Mariah Carey.

JazzReview.com: Let's talk about a few of the songs on the new CD. It opens with "Abracadabra." That's Steve Miller's song, right? It doesn't sound anything like the original.

Robin McKelle: I know! It's like, 'wait I know this song, but I don't know why.' I was working on choosing the songs for the album in the fall of 2007. I was coming home from a gig and driving in my car. I heard "Abracadabra" on the radio. I was totally in the focus of choosing songs for the record. Everything I heard at the time I was thinking maybe this would work or maybe that. I turned off the radio and started singing it with a swing feel. I heard the horns and stuff and thought this could be cool. I called Willie and said, "I think this could be a great idea." He said, "It's not going to work," but he called me the next day and said, "I think it could work. I have a few ideas." I'm really happy with the way it came out.

JazzReview.com: Another song on the CD is "Save Your Love For Me." Tell us about that song.

Robin McKelle: I studied at Berklee College of Music. I finished my undergrad there. It was a tune that I have always loved. One of my teachers showed me it. For me, it was Nancy Wilson and Cannonball Adderley. I really had this thing about it and always wanted to record it. I started working on it with my trio while I was on tour, and we did a treatment of it. It was just one of the ones that I decided to add to the record. I thought it fit in well. I love the slight touch of blues in it. The lyrics are great.

JazzReview.com: There's also "Go To Hell," a Nina Simone tune.

Robin McKelle: One of my favorite artists. The song is a little dark, but I love her music. I'm really drawn to what she does. It's kind of a hipster kind of sounding tune.

JazzReview.com: Tell us about another song.

Robin McKelle: I'm particularly proud of "Remember." That's an original composition. It felt good to be able to record one of my compositions, and I also play piano on it. It was a personal accomplishment for me. I'm happy to have that song on there.

JazzReview.com: Are you writing a lot these days?

Robin McKelle: I've always been writing. Now, it is hard because I'm on tour so much, but when I'm off the road I write a lot. I hope to put a couple of more originals on my next album. I'm already starting to think about all that.

JazzReview.com: How hard was it to choose the songs on the CD?

Robin McKelle: It's always a difficult process. You have to choose 11, 12, 13 songs. There are so many to choose from. It's difficult, and it takes quite a long time. Once you have the core four or five that are definite then we look at what's there and try to balance it out with other songs that will work well and flow together. We actually recorded 16 songs. The other ones, after they were recorded, I just didn't feel they worked here on this album. Maybe they will be on another album at some point. It's a long process. It takes months for me.

JazzReview.com: The CD debuted at No. 1 on the jazz charts in France.

Robin McKelle: Yes, it's really exciting. I was signed to Blue Note Europe in December of this past year. They released the album in France in April. It debuted at No. 1 and stayed there for seven weeks. I think it is still No. 2. It's doing really well. I've been touring France and Europe this summer. The response has been amazing.

JazzReview.com: It looks like you're going back in a few weeks.

Robin McKelle: I am. I'm just here for a little break and then going back. I'm doing a famous jazz festival in France, the Marciac Jazz Festival. I'll be playing there with Bobby McFerrin.

JazzReview.com: How did you get your break into the international scene?

Robin McKelle: It's kind of a cool story. I had a piece air on NPR with my first album. It started to do well. It took us all a little bit by surprise. I didn't have a manager or agent. My label here, Cheap Lullaby, is an indie label. They connected with an independent label in France. The label in France really loved the album and said, "We want to bring her over and put her on tour and see how it goes." I started out small. I did a show for the JVC Jazz Festival in Paris in a 150-seat club. It was a success, and then the album came out. There was a lot of buzz. The publicist that I had was wonderful. She got me on a national TV show. A lot of people started hearing about it. I connected with management there. I got an agent there, and the agent started booking me. I played a 500-seat club. It was sold out for two nights. Then I went to a 1,000-seat theater. It kept going. It happened very quickly. Quickly, but I've been trying to do it my whole life. It's been a wonderful experience.

JazzReview.com: So, the new album was released first in France?

Robin McKelle: Yes, Modern Antique has been out there. It will be released in the United States on Aug. 19. It's getting released in different territories at different times.

JazzReview.com: Will we see you doing a tour in the United States?

Robin McKelle: I am. In September, we're going to be in the States a bit. We're going to be at Dizzy's Jazz Club in New York on 23 of September. Then, I'm coming back for a U.S. tour in February. I have all the dates on my MySpace page and on my Web site.

For more information: <http://www.robinmckelle.com>